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ABSTRACT

In February 1993, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned focus groups with Hispanic viewers to determine the perceptions of public television by Hispanics. The project was conducted by Norman Hecht Research and included Hispanic viewers and non-viewers in four cities--New York, Miami, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. The topic for discussion was adult television viewing, particularly viewing of prime time programming on public television. While audience ratings data show a high viewership among Hispanics for children's programming on public television, the viewership of adult programming is generally less among Hispanics than it is for the total population. Focus group participants were asked to discuss the image they had of public television in their market; what programming they watched, if any; programming of special interest to them as Hispanics; and the image of Hispanics on television in general as well as on public television. The strongest image of public television among all Hispanics was one of family programming with especially good programming for children. Participants had somewhat sketchy knowledge about specific programming, with little awareness of programming with special Hispanic interest. The most frequent complaint was the "lack of visibility of Hispanics on English language television." Public television was given slightly more credit than commercial television for not reinforcing negative stereotypes of Hispanics. Language was found to be a barrier to public television viewing among Hispanics who were not fluent in English. Implications and recommendations for public television managers, programmers and those attempting to reach Hispanics for educational purposes are discussed. (Author/SWC)

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PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC TELEVISION BY HISPANICS

One of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States today is the Hispanic population. Projections show that this group will be the largest minority by the year 2010.[1]

How well is public television serving the Hispanic population now?

How can public television serve the needs of Hispanic viewers better and increase the Hispanic audience?

In order to determine the perceptions of pubic television by Hispanics, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned focus groups with Hispanic viewers and non-viewers in four cities: New York, Miami, San Antonio, and Los Angeles.[2] The topic for discussion was adult television viewing, particularly viewing of prime time programming on public television. While audience ratings data show a high viewership among Hispanics for children's programming on public television, the viewership of adult programming is generally less among Hispanics than the total population.

In the focus groups participants were asked to discuss the image they had of public television in their market. They were asked what programming they watched, if any. They were questioned about any programming of special interest to them as Hispanics. A few clips of programming that have aired on public television, particularly some of the Hispanic interest programming, were shown to the participants.[3] Finally, they discussed the image of Hispanics on television in general as well as on public television. Although

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[1] The 1990 Census shows that 22 million Hispanics live in the U.S. today and are nine percent of the population. By 2010 projections estimate the Hispanic population at 40 million, 13 percent of the total population.

[2] The project was conducted by Norman Hecht Research in February of 1993.

[3] Clips of programming with Hispanic interest included: *Los Mineros, Bowl of Beings, Stand and Deliver, La Pastorela,* and *Campaign for Cuba.*

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children's programming was mentioned in all of the groups, the primary purpose was to discuss adult programming.

Important factors to remember in analyzing the results of the four groups overall are the demographic differences in the populations in the markets studied. Although focus group research cannot be projected to the population as a whole, general differences in the Hispanic populations in these markets were represented through the participants in the focus groups. These market differences cannot be ignored in attempting to serve the Hispanic population. In addition to usual demographic factors of age, income and education, the Hispanic population has unique differences in ethnic origin, recency of immigration and English language proficiency. In New York there is a higher concentration of Puerto Ricans; in Miami, Cubans dominate the Hispanic population while there are also large portions of Latin American immigrants, and in San Antonio and Los Angeles the ethnic origin is primarily Mexican-American. Differences in recency of immigration and language, however, contribute to cultural differences in San Antonio and Los Angeles. In San Antonio, the Mexican-American population is more likely to have been born in the United States and be fluent in English.

Language was found to be a barrier to public television viewing among Hispanics who were not fluent in English. In Miami and Los Angeles, the non-viewer groups were conducted in Spanish. While respondents were aware of public television primarily as a channel for children, little viewing of adult programming was done primarily for reasons of language. There was, however, an interest in seeing the programming translated into Spanish because public television was perceived as offering programming that was unavailable elsewhere.

The Spanish language participants were heavily dependent upon Spanish language television, *but did not generally find that the Spanish language stations met their needs as viewers.* The Spanish language channels were faulted in all groups for having a limited range of programming: mainly soap operas and low quality movies from Mexico. These programs were not given high marks for the portrayal of Hispanic people: the often repeated complaint was of stereotypical images of "maids" and "criminals" on both English and Spanish commercial television.

In general, respondents in all of the groups seemed to be fairly unhappy with the choices they had in television viewing. The most frequent complaint was the *lack of visibility of Hispanics on English language television.*

Image of public television

The strongest image of public television among all the Hispanics was one of family programming with especially good quality programming for children. The greatest exposure to public television in the non-viewer groups was through the children's programming. In addition to the younger children's daytime programming, family-oriented programming such as nature shows, or programming that teachers might recommend for students was top of mind with the participants. The channel was rated highly for its educational programming.

"a lot of things my family learns is from public television" Los Angeles, viewer

"(public television) is for people who care about what is going on" San Antonio, viewer

"Channel 13 is for people who want to learn" New York, viewer

Although this educational image occasionally was associated with boring and school-like television, the overall response was extremely positive. Respondents perceived value in public television as an educational resource. Suggestions for more educational programming, particularly helping newer immigrants with coping skills or language, were mentioned in the groups. While some of the Spanish language dependent respondents wished the programming were available in Spanish, they also mentioned the usefulness of programming that would help them with English because they could not get to an English class.

"I love English, but I work 12-13 hours a day for 20 years. I never had a chance to study English" Los Angeles, non-viewer

"women will be interested, because they can't go out to English classes if they have to take care of the kids at home" Los Angeles, non-viewer

Programming on public television

While most of the groups were able to name the more familiar PBS series, they gave an impression of somewhat sketchy knowledge about the specific programming. There was an awareness of the genres available on public television: educational and children's programs, documentaries, nature, and classical music. The favorite category was nature programming. Programming which instructed how to do something such as cooking or sewing was also preferred. However, there was little awareness of programming with special Hispanic interest.

The dominant reason given by Hispanics for not watching public television stations more, including the few programs of special interest to them, is that they simply do not know about the programs.

"very few Latinos know about this channel" Los Angeles, non-viewer

"I would watch more if I knew what was going to be on" San Antonio, non-viewer

They felt that public television does not promote the programming enough. One frequent complaint was that the program listings did not describe the program clearly (*"no specifics, it doesn't catch your eye" San Antonio, viewer).* In addition to the standard media promotions, they suggested some alternative ways to reach the Hispanic community: program announcements to students in schools, fliers given out in supermarkets, bulletin boards or newsletters in companies employing Hispanics and bulletin boards in churches.

The clips of the programs with Hispanic interest were generally favorably received. However, with the exception of *Stand and Deliver,* the majority of

the participants had not seen the programs. Programming about the Hispanic heritage was considered to be important, both to teach their children about their heritage and also to teach non-Hispanics about the Hispanic culture. Ethnic origin of the respondents played a role in the reactions to the different Hispanic cultures in the clips. While some respondents were eager to learn about *any* Hispanic culture, others were only interested in programming relating to their own background.

"I want to see other Hispanics...enough Mexicans!" Miami, viewer

"I want to see things from all Hispanic cultures -- Mexico, Spain, South America and all Spanish-speaking cultures. Something to broaden our horizons." San Antonio, viewer

These comments show the importance of offering a variety of Hispanic cultures in the programs.

Image of Hispanics on public television

While public television is perceived as not much better in making them visible, it is given slightly more credit than commercial television for not reinforcing negative stereotypes of Hispanics. Hispanic-Americans also think that public television has a special responsibility in this area.

They emphasize the importance of positive role models for their children. They also value positive images for inspiring Hispanics to reach higher goals.

"like to see more about successful people, something for kids to identify with" San Antonio, non-viewer

"I want Hispanics to be more ambitious" New York, viewer

But they also want non-Hispanics to have a favorable image of Hispanics. Negative reactions to the clip from "Bowl of Beings" centered on the offensive image of Hispanics that the comedy portrayed. While some viewers found the program funny, they were concerned about the effect on children and on non-Hispanic viewers.

"other people will see us like this" Miami, viewer

Implications for public television managers and programmers

While Hispanics value public television for quality programming for children and hold a positive image toward the overall public broadcasting service, more strategic efforts to grow the adult Hispanic audience are required. Because the Hispanic population is composed of diverse groups, multi-faceted strategies are needed.

A crucial component to meeting the needs of Hispanic viewers is to learn as much as possible about the Hispanic population in your own market. Only after a thorough study of the local market can you successfully implement the optimum mix of the following recommendations.

Offer Spanish language translations of programming. While the focus of this project was on programming in English, in many markets it will be necessary to make available a Spanish translation of public television programs in

order to meet the needs of Spanish language dependent Hispanics. Educational programs and programs with special interest to Hispanics should be a priority for SAP translation or other technology.

Increase programs with Hispanic content. Two essential categories are 1) programs that showcase the history and cultures of a variety of Latin cultures, and 2) programs that give useful information to enable Hispanics to cope better or to improve their lives in this country.

Programming should reflect the diversity of Hispanic culture. A Mexican dominance of programming will not satisfy the broader Hispanic community.

Make successful, articulate Hispanics visible on the air. Whether or not the program content is about Hispanic culture, Hispanics want to be included.

Motivate Hispanic children and teens with positive role models. Parents want to see successful role models for their children.

Avoid negative stereotypes, including comedy and portrayals of poverty. Programming which was perceived as showing a negative image was rejected, even if produced by and for Hispanics.

Review promotional strategies with respect to the Hispanic community. Make sure that program listings give enough detailed information. Evaluate the use of Spanish radio to promote programs. Promote prime time programs for the family in the children's blocks, especially around *Sesame Street, Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*, and *Barney and Friends.* Distribute guides or programming announcements in schools, workplaces, churches or shopping areas where Hispanics are likely to be concentrated.

Schedule at regular and convenient times. Regular scheduling of programming of interest to Hispanics with a convenient weekend repeat is desirable. Late evening programs do not fit in well for Hispanics who work early in the morning. Do not schedule Hispanic oriented programs opposite the most highly rated programs on the Spanish language stations, such as *Sabado Gigante.*

In summary, public television already reaches Hispanic viewers in the children's blocks. Much of public television's adult programming appeals to Hispanics in terms of content. With further efforts to include Hispanics on-air and to promote programming to the local Hispanic community effectively, programmers can increase their service to this fast-growing minority population.

If you have questions about these data, please refer them to Janice Jones (202) 879-9677. We also welcome any comments and recommendations about how to make the data more useful to you.